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ABSTRACT

This paper presents guidelines for writing a syllabus for college courses for both experienced and novice teachers. The purpose of the syllabus in communicating course content, purpose, direction and requirements is discussed, as is the necessity of planning the course before syllabus writing. Major content areas of the syllabus are reviewed, including course and instructor information, texts and materials, course objectives, calendar and policies, attendance, class participation, grading, honor policy, and available support services. (Contains 16 references.) (JPB)

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September, 1992

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"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to." . . . .
(*Alice in Wonderland*, Chapter VI, p. 64; Carroll, 1960)

Introduction

Etymologically syllabus means a "label" or "table of contents." The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines syllabus as outline of a course of study. We agree that a syllabus should contain an outline, and a schedule of topics, and many more items of information. However, we suggest that the primary purpose of a syllabus is to communicate to one's students what the course is about, why the course is taught, where it is going, and what will be required of the students for them to complete the course with a passing grade.

Most of this paper will list suggestions from the literature about what information might be included in your course syllabus. It is extremely unlikely that you will include everything listed. We suggest two criteria in deciding what information to include. First, include all information that students need to have *at the beginning of the course*; second, include all information that students need to have *in writing*. We believe that any really important information about the course should be in writing. However, it may be better to introduce some information later in the term, e.g., the details of a required project. To attempt to include every single item of importance in your syllabus is to insure that the students will not read much of it.

To the experienced teacher, probably few of the items listed in this paper are likely to come as a surprise. However, Lowther, Stark, and Martens (1989) found in their interviews with faculty and in their examinations of syllabi that "obvious" items were often omitted. At the very least we hope this IDEA Paper will provide the reader with a useful organization of what is already known.

In compiling the list of items of information that might be included in a syllabus, we started with an unpublished article by the first author—an abbreviated version of which appeared in *The Teaching Professor* (Altman, 1989). We found additional items in other publications (Birdsall, 1989; Lowther, Stark, & Martens, 1989; Millis, no date; Wilkerson & McKnight, 1978). There was surprising agreement about the major areas of information to be included in a syllabus.

Major Content Areas of a Syllabus

Course Information. The first items of information in a syllabus should give course information: **course title**, **course number**, and **credit hours**. Also, are there any **prerequisites**? Is the **permission of the instructor** required? Include the **location of classroom**, and the **days and hours class/lab/studio/etc. meets**.

Instructor Information. Second, the students need information about the instructor: **full name**, **title**; **office location** (and where to leave assignments), **office phone number**; **office hours**. Depending on the size of the class (and other factors), it may be desirable to include an **emergency phone number**; quite often this can be the number of the department office. Many instructors give the students their **home telephone number**. If you do, it is well to also list restrictions, e.g., "No calls between 10:30 p.m. and 8:30 a.m. please." If you are helped by **teaching assistants** or other instructors, their names, locations, and phone numbers should also be listed.

Texts, Readings, Materials. College-level instruction—at least in the United States—is heavily dependent upon the use of print material, if not a required textbook, then a variety of readings. These are becoming increasingly costly. The syllabus should provide the students with detailed information about the following.

Textbook(s)—include the title, author, date (and edition), publisher, cost, where available. (often it is appropriate to indicate why the particular text was chosen and/or how extensively it will be used).

Supplementary reading(s)—in addition to the detailed bibliographic information about the readings, the syllabus should indicate whether the readings are required or only recommended, and whether the readings are on reserve in the library or available for purchase in the bookstore. Sometimes instructors make their own books available to

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students. If this is the case for the given course, that information might be included in the syllabus along with whatever conditions apply to their use.

Materials—although many courses use only print material, there are a myriad of courses that require additional—sometimes expensive—materials, e.g., lab or safety equipment, art supplies, special calculators or even computers, etc.

Course Description/Objectives. The treatment of this area—variously called course description, content, goals, objectives—differed more than any other in the publications we reviewed.

The bare minimum would be to repeat the **description in the college's catalog**—assuming that it describes the course with some accuracy. Certainly a paragraph describing the **general content of the course**—and even a sentence or two on why the course is important—would not be excessive. Information about **instructional methods**, e.g., large lecture with small discussion sections, may also be included here.

Some instructors, who have developed detailed instructional objectives, include them in their syllabi. Such inclusion may result in information overload for some students. However, the inclusion of *general* **course goals** (e.g., the learning and application of the general principles of. . ., or the development of the skill of. . ., or the development of a more positive attitude toward. . .) can help orient the students to the purpose of the course, the instructor's expectations, etc.

Course Calendar/Schedule. Some instructors are concerned that, if they include a **daily—or weekly—schedule of topics** to be covered, they can be held legally liable if they depart from it. One remedy for this is to state that the schedule is tentative and subject to change depending upon the progress of the class. In many cases the instructor has only limited flexibility about scheduling anyway, e.g., in a multisection course where departmental exams are administered on specific dates, or in a course which is a prerequisite for another course (the material has to be—should be—covered by the end of the course). If we expect students to meet our deadlines, to plan their work, we must give them the information needed for such planning.

The calendar or schedule should also include the dates for **exams, quizzes, or other means of assessment**. (We are *not* implying that all evaluation of students must be in groups and at the same time. A course in college teaching might require that the students be videotaped while teaching a class, so the syllabus could say "to be scheduled individually.")

The calendar should also include **due dates for major assignments.** For example, when a paper is due; if the topic has to be approved, when; if an outline or draft is an interim step, when it is due.

Finally, any ***required*** **special events** need to be included in the calendar, e.g., a lecture by a visiting speaker, a dramatic or musical performance, a field trip.

Course Policies. Every discussion of syllabi we read included something about course policies, although what specifically was included varied. We suggest the following topics.

Attendance, lateness—at least for freshman and sophomore classes, and perhaps for all undergraduate classes, the syllabus should include some statement about attendance (is it required, will students who attend regularly be given a break if the grade is borderline?) and about lateness, at least if it is penalized. (Students who arrive late disturb the class, but on some campuses it is not possible for a student to get from one part of the campus to another within the allotted time; sometimes our colleagues do not let the students leave promptly.)

Class participation—in the medieval lecture hall, class participation was not an issue, but if students are to learn to apply, analyze, synthesize, etc., they need to be active. Such approaches are contrary to the experiences—and preferences—of many students. If active participation is expected, the syllabus needs to say so. It also needs to explain if/how participation will be graded.

Missed exams or assignments—since these affect grades, they are of interest to students. Syllabi should inform the students whether exams and assignments can be made up; statements regarding earning extra credit should also be included if that is an option.

Lab safety/health—in some courses these issues can literally be a matter of life or death. Even if detailed materials are handed out early in the course, the syllabus should include a short statement about the importance of these issues and indicate that more detailed information will follow.

Academic dishonesty—in some syllabi this is treated as a separate area. The syllabus should address questions related to cheating and plagiarism. On campuses where these topics are treated in detail in a student handbook, it is sufficient for the syllabus to simply refer the students to that handbook. In the absence of such a resource, details in the syllabus are necessary. Many students actually do not know what constitutes plagiarism. We owe it to the students to explain what is considered to be plagiarism or cheating.

Grading—this topic, even more than academic dishonesty, is often treated as a separate area. Given the students' interest in grades, such treatment is certainly defensible. Each syllabus should include details about how the students will be evaluated—what factors will be included, how they will be weighted, and how they will be translated into grades. Information about the appeals procedures, often included in a student handbook, is also appropriate at least for freshman and sophomore classes.

Available Support Services. Most college courses have available to the students a considerable variety of instructional support services. We often bemoan the fact that the students do not avail themselves of these services. Perhaps this is because we do not draw their attention to the possibilities. The **library** is probably the oldest resource, and perhaps still the richest. Including a brief statement in the syllabus identifying collections, journals, abstracts, audio or video tapes, etc. which the library has which are relevant to the course would be appropriate. If the institution has a **learning center**, making the students aware of its services can be of real benefit to students. In today's world **computers** are becoming almost a necessity. Most campuses have some terminals, if not personal computers, available for student use. Many courses have other support services unique to them. Briefly describe what is available in the syllabus, or tell the students where they can get detailed information.

Beyond the Syllabus

While reading this paper it has undoubtedly occurred to many of you that our suggestions often are based on certain assumptions about what is appropriate for a course or what constitutes effective teaching. You are, of course, correct. "*Before* the Syllabus" would really be a better title for this section. If one of the main purposes of a syllabus is to communicate to the students what the course is about, it presumes that we have some idea about what we think the course should accomplish. It requires that we have **planned the course**.

Other than commenting generally on the content of the course, most writers do not raise special questions about the underpinnings of the course. Lowther's *et al.* (1989) *Preparing Course Syllabi for Improved Communication* is a significant exception. They list educational beliefs as a separate area, including beliefs about students, beliefs about educational purpose, and beliefs about the teaching role. This concern will come as no surprise to those acquainted with the work of Stark, Lowther, and their colleagues at NCRIPTAL studying course planning. In addition to the above publication, the following are suggested for the reader who wishes to read on the topic in depth (Peterson, Cameron, Mets, Jones, & Ettington, 1986; Stark, & Lowther, 1986; Stark, Lowther, Bentley, Ryan, Martens, Genthon, Wren, & Shaw, 1990; Stark, Lowther, Ryan, Bomotti, Genthon, Haven, & Martens, 1988; Stark, Lowther, Ryan, & Genthon, 1988; Stark, Shaw, & Lowther, 1989).

For readers wishing a single book, Diamond's (1989) *Designing and Improving Courses and Curricula in Higher Education* is a thorough one volume treatment on course design. For something even shorter (79 pages), try Gronlund's (1985) *Stating Objectives for Classroom Instruction*. For something very short, but still thought provoking, complete the "Teaching Goals Inventory" in the forthcoming *Classroom Assessment Techniques* (Angelo & Cross, in press).

First we—individual instructors, faculty groups, curriculum committees—must plan the course, must decide where we want the student to get to. Then the syllabus is one way to tell the students which way they ought to go.

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